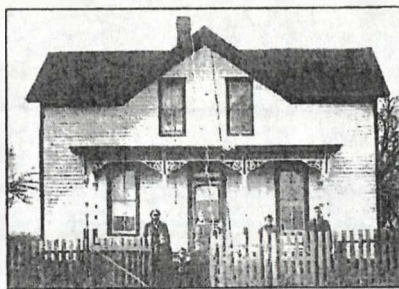


In search of freedom

Lost Creek Township early settlement for African-Americans



Early home: The ancestors of sisters Geneva and Dorothy Ross lived in this Lost Creek Township home in the 1860s.



Longtime residents: Sisters Geneva and Dorothy Ross grew up in Vigo County's Lost Creek Township, where their family has lived for more than 100 years. Their ancestors left North Carolina to escape oppression and slavery.

By Patrizia Pensa
Tribune-Star

Everything about Geneva and Dorothy Ross's spotless white home suggests that loving attention is paid to the 76-year-old landmark. Weedless grass carpets the land, which is otherwise primed with rain-bow-colored flowers. Surrounding soybean fields show no signs of damage. The Rosses tend to their northern Vigo County home because their parents did so. A brown-sugar-colored 71-year-old, Geneva Ross recalls in an intimidating voice her mother's demand for "no weeds!"

Inside

■ A rundown of notable Vigo County African-Americans who left their mark. Page E5

Not just a pretty piece of property, their home serves as a reminder of their history in Lost Creek Township, which is also the history of African-American settlers in the Wabash Valley.

The Rosses' ancestors settled Lost Creek about 170 years ago and were among the first African-Americans in the area. Four generations of their family have lived on the land.

Like their gardening, Geneva and Dorothy Ross have made tracking

their family history a pastime they won't abandon: The sisters fill albums with hundreds of documents, photos and newspaper clippings to tell their family's story.

"A lot of people don't know about their kin folks. We always knew," said Geneva Ross, who identifies herself as part African-American, white and Native American.

This racial mixing allowed the Rosses' ancestors to leave North Carolina in the early 1800s, when slavery was legal in the South.

Dixon Stewart and Jeremiah Anderson were two early African-American settlers who came to Lost Creek in 1831. They were also the Rosses' great, great-grandfathers.

Along with four other families, the Stewarts and the Andersons brought to Indiana papers saying they were free. An Aug. 21, 1826, document says Dixon Stewart was born and raised "of free parents and had conducted himself in an honest and orderly way."

Free African-Americans left the South to escape its oppressive atmosphere, said Warren Swindell, Indiana State University professor of African and African-American Studies.

"There were some 'free persons of color' in the South, but they were only a minute away from being sold back into slavery," Swindell said.

Freedom wasn't the only aspect of

northern life the Dixons and Stewarts found attractive. Before their arrival in the 1830s, Bowen Roberts, a free African-American, traveled westward as a scout of sorts.

"[Roberts] was so impressed that he went back to North Carolina and said, 'You've got to go back to Lost Creek because there are hogs roaming with knives and forks in their backs,'" Geneva Ross said.

Updating the analogy, Geneva Ross interpreted Roberts' comment: He thought "the living was easy" in Lost Creek.

After traveling in covered wagons with their oxen, these pioneer settlers found virgin farmland and unadulterated wilderness. Building a community would take great effort.

The six families purchased their 40 acres of land, cleared it and began to farm. The Rosses' ancestors became the most prosperous men in the area with about 10,000 acres of cornfields and farmland, Geneva Ross said matter-of-factly.

Wealth, though, was not a hand-out.

"Life was extremely difficult and onerous for them because Indiana didn't recognize them as citizens," Swindell said. "The law wouldn't let them go to school, vote or own land."

About the series

In a seven-part series that began Aug. 16 and runs in the Sunday Tribune-Star, the newspaper explores Terre Haute's rich ethnic history, focusing on six groups whose legacies are still visible and viable today.

Global



Heritage

Sept. 13 — The African-Americans: For Geneva and Dorothy Ross, their house in northern Vigo County is a reminder of their family's 170-year history in Lost Creek Township.

Sept. 20 — The Syrians: The first Syrian to arrive in Terre Haute, Kaleel Hanna, came in 1902. He was originally from the Isha'ara, and eventually 17 families came to Terre Haute from the Isha'ara.

Sept. 27 — The Indians: Natives of India began moving to Terre Haute in the 1960s after federal immigration laws removed the quota system.

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They survived through the Quakers, who would get land for them."

In 1836, Lost Creek residents built a combination school and meeting house on land donated by early African-American settlers Kinchen and Nancy Roberts. Two years later, the six founding families and local Quakers together formed the Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

With the start of the Civil War in 1861, some local African-Americans joined the battle for full emancipation — 36 African-American men from Terre Haute and Vigo County enlisted in the northern army.

But for the rest of the about 1,000 Vigo County African-Americans, the post-Civil War wave of industrialization flooding America in the late 1800s was not a great benefit.

"As Terre Haute became an industrial hub, blacks did all the hard jobs that no one else wanted to do," Swindell said. "If they were working in the foundry, their jobs were closest to where the metal was heated in the furnace. The lowest jobs were classified as 'Negro jobs,' and that didn't start changing until the 1950s and '60s."

Since their early settlement, African-Americans had promoted education for their children to give them more options than just "Negro jobs." In 1869, African-Americans were legally allowed to attend public schools.

Educated African-Americans had greater mobility. After finishing college in less than three years, Geneva Ross left Lost Creek for East Chicago because she didn't want to teach in Terre Haute's segregated schools.

Retired ISU Professor Emeritus Wesley Lyda left Terre Haute to teach at universities in Georgia, Ohio and Maryland. During his school years, Lyda said he didn't experience much discrimination.



Those who came before: A group of Geneva and Dorothy Rosses' ancestors pose for a photograph in the 1850s.

tion in the 1920s-30s.

Segregated lunchrooms in high school didn't stop Lyda's white classmates from stopping in his cafeteria to talk, he said. African-Americans were not forced to sit at the back of the classroom, and they played on the football team.

Outside the classroom, rules were different. At the Liberty Theater, African-Americans were allowed to sit only in the balcony; and when one girl chose to sit on the first floor, the police were called to reiterate the law.

These small challenges did not fluctuate to extreme violence in Terre Haute as compared with occurrences in the South during the civil rights movement. Few African-Americans at the university level were involved with civil rights, and few were active in local politics at the time, Swindell

said.

But Terre Haute felt some aftershocks from the quaking African-American protests for equality. At ISU, the African American Cultural Center was formed in response to student activism in the 1960s, said director Charles Brown.

"We needed our own organizations," said Brown, who attended ISU in the '70s. "The center was developed because African-Americans didn't feel a part of the campus."

African-American students helped design the center with Lyda. As the center's first director, Lyda said its purpose was simple: to give African-American students a place to gather.

Brown said he started working at the center in 1978 because of a concern for African-American students. The community — and especially the children — need role models, and Brown says he can be one.

"I've been through the muck and mire," he said. "In the '60s I would've been seen as a poor kid who had nothing. I worked hard, working two or three jobs. . . It's important for blacks to know who they are and where they come from."

While African-Americans had gained the center and African-American studies courses from the university, more needs to be done in the community, Brown said.

Throughout their history in Vigo County, African-Americans have left their mark in education, health and religion: Warren Anderson was the first African-American member of the Indiana State Board of Education, Gregory Bell was an Olympic gold medal winner and local dentist, and many African-Americans have served as pastors in century-old churches.

But the question for African-Americans is not



Population at 1980 Census population. Legend: Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church, 311 Crawford St.; Underwood Cemetery, First Street Road, Linton Township.

Tribune Staff/Wanda Niska

what contributions they have made to Vigo County, Brown said, it is what the community has contributed to their struggle for equality.

"What has the city given to the community?" he asked. "Many [African-Americans] are still dealing with survival and living from day to day."

The community needs to form a partnership with the African-American sector so everyone can have "a nice home, good job, education — the so-called good life," Brown said.

When the Rosses' great, great-grandfathers built the first African-American community almost two centuries ago, they sought the same thing — the good life, which they believed could be found on land where hogs roamed with knives and forks in their backs.

African-Americans who made history

■ **Jane Dabney Shakkelford:** A Terre Haute African-American educator, Shakkelford wrote in 1938 the first book written about African-Americans for grade school students. The book, "The Child Story of the Negro," received international acclaim. Shakkelford taught in Vigo County schools for 42 years and had served as secretary of the Teachers Association of Terre Haute.

■ **Morton A. Lewis:** An area writer and artist, Lewis authored "The Seelyville Story," "Underground Railroad Station" and "Every Inch a Horse."

■ **Edward J. Royce:** In 1870, this Terre Haute man became the fifth president of Liberia. Royce became interested in relocating African-Americans to Liberia at a 1842 state convention run by the American Colonization Society at the Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church. He sailed to Liberia that year and became the country's wealthiest citizen with his shipping business.

In 1871, a year after being named president, Royce was removed from office by an armed coup d'état.

■ **Benjamin Sherman "Scatman" Crothers:** In the late 1920s this Terre Haute man attended Wiley High School, and he started a band that performed in the Wabash Valley during this time. Crothers then left Terre Haute for Hollywood, and has appeared in several films, including "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Two of a Kind" with John Travolta. In the '70s he played Louie the garbage man on the television series "Chico and the Man."

■ **Greg Bell:** A Garfield High School graduate, Bell won the Gold Medal in the long jump in the 1956 Olympic Games. Prior to that, he established an NCAA record of 26 feet, 7 inches in the jump. Nicknamed "The Purple Eagle," Bell was undefeated in the long jump during his four years at Indiana University,

where he attended dental school.

■ **Willa Mae Brown:** She attended Wiley High School in Terre Haute in the 1920s. Brown received her pilot's license in the '30s and in Chicago formed the Coffey School of Aeronautics with Cornelius Coffey. Brown became the federal coordinator of the Civilian Pilot Training Program.

■ **Junius "Rainey" Bibbs:** Originally from Kentucky, Bibbs and his family moved to Terre Haute in 1910. By 1933 he was playing professional baseball for the Indianapolis ABCs in the Negro Baseball League. After a successful college baseball and football career, Bibbs returned to professional baseball and played for the Cincinnati Tigers. In 1937 — the same year he earned a degree from Indiana State University — Bibbs was chosen for the Negro League All-Star team as a second baseman.